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EDITORIALS

Libertarians need to leave the fringe

The other Maine political party came to Augusta last weekend.

No, it wasn't the Republicans (who met here earlier) or the Democrats (who were meeting at the same time in Bangor), but the Libertarians — the only other party qualified for the statewide ballot.

About 100 people turned out for the event, but what the Libertarians lack in numbers they make up in spunk.

The party's presidential candidate, Andre Marrou, offered a rousing address which was poles apart from the warmed-over rhetoric normally featured at political conventions.

He was quotable. Libertarians, Marrou explained, differ from the major parties in refusing to meddle in people's personal lives: "The Democrats want to force you to do good. The Republicans want to force you to be good."

He was provocative: "We have more troops in Japan than the Japanese do. It's insanity."

And he asked his audience to think about why our laws are written the way they are. Why, for instance, selling the tobacco which claims hundreds of thousands of lives a year is not only legal, but subsidized, while selling arguably less toxic marijuana can land you in a federal prison for 30 years.

But the trouble with Libertarians is that they don't know when to stop. Carried to the extreme — and most Libertarians do — there's practically no role for government in the society they envision.

Marrou would turn over roads to abutters, and let them pay for maintenance. Might work for a subdivision, but how about I-95? He ridiculed government attempts to mandate seat belt use; should we get rid of driver's licenses too? They, too, are a restriction on personal choice. He advocated having private citizens keep the peace by being as well-armed as the military; this will not sit well with the vast majority who think assault rifles on the streets are already a bit much.

One might answer that Libertarians are in the business of stirring up things, of getting people to rethink their assumptions.

But they are also, presumably, in the business of getting votes. And until Libertarians begin balancing their often attractive principles with a respect for proportion, balance and the way things work, they will never become a third national party, but will simply be out there on the fringe.



MARROU